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AUTHOR	Klauke, Amy
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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest focuses on school restructuring as the central issue in the school reform movement by answering five questions: (1) What is "restructuring?" (2) What characteristics of the current educational system are the objects of reform? (3) How can restructuring attend to new skills students will need? (4) How can individual schools implement a restructuring plan? (5) How can district officials participate in the restructuring process? The digest concludes by encouraging structural experimentation. In addition, any institutionalization of new structures should be predicated on school districts' reducing regulatory barriers; providing implementation, support, and technical assistance; linking rewards to performance; and researching and disseminating the results of effective new practices among their schools. (JAM)

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RESTRUCTURING THE SCHOOLS

By Amy Klauke

Having ridden the first wave of education reform measures, which stressed accountability, schools now find themselves facing another major challenge. Restructuring has become the central issue in the school reform movement.

Technological advances, increasing ethnic diversity, as well as rising rates of poverty, drug abuse, suicide, and divorce in the U.S., are a few of the demographic vicissitudes that are profoundly affecting student performance. In response, educators are taking a serious look at societal changes and trends with an eye toward restructuring schools.

What Is "Restructuring"?

"To restructure means to preserve and build upon what has been successful in educating our children and to rethink and redesign those aspects of the enterprise that have failed," Glenn Harvey and David Crandall (1988) say.

Specific areas to review, Harvey and Crandall advise, include mission and goals; organization; management; curriculum; instruction; roles, responsibilities, and regulation; external involvement; and finances.

Strategies for structural change benefit from the establishment of clearly defined goals, which may include a shift toward school-based management, decentralized decision-making, outcome-based education, more active hands-on learning, or a broadening or synthesizing of curricula.

What Characteristics of the Current Educational System Are Objects of Reform?

Before attempting to establish a direction for change, it is necessary to first analyze the existing educational structure. Kenneth A. Sirotnik (1987) points out that the educational structure is based on a factory model, with "rational, linear, machine-like top-down decisions, a production line layout, reliance on technological solutions and the use of quality control." School organization today, Lynn Olson (1988) notes, includes "the rigid grouping of students by age and ability; . . . anonymous and impersonal environments, and the dominance of passive, sedentary learning." William Spady (1988) adds that our calendar-based educational system emphasizes curriculum coverage over student mastery and has legitimized the bell-curve as a measure of student achievement. He argues that valuing outcome, rather than rate, should inform educational organization.

Barbara Benham Tye (1987) distinguishes what she labels "the deep structure" of the educational system from the unique personality of individual schools. Components of deep structure include physical uniformity, control orientation, similarity of curriculum and schedule, reliance on test scores, and tracking. The unique personality of each school, she says, reflects its own history, community characteristics, internal relationships, particular school problems, and the climate of its classrooms.

Any restructuring process needs to address whether or not institutionalized assumptions about education are being challenged and how to best solve resultant conflicts. Most educators agree that restructuring that begins at the local level is best able to send tremors of positive change throughout the deep structure.

How Can Restructuring Strategies Attend to the New Skills Students Will Need?

Social changes are challenging the fundamental structure and outcomes of our educational system, thus demanding that schools do more than provide supplementary courses or extracurricular support groups.

Considering these developments, Michael Cohen (1987) recommends that students will need to acquire "the ability to communicate complex ideas, to analyze and solve complex problems, to identify order and find direction in an ambiguous and uncertain environment and to think and reason abstractly." Small groups and student-selected activities, Cohen suggests, could "provide opportunities for all students to become meaningfully engaged in reasonably complex and demanding learning tasks . . . and gain practice working cooperatively with others." Schools that provide opportunities for frequent success and an environment in which students receive personal attention, he says, enhance students' sense of self-worth and competence and foster a positive attachment to the school. He advises treating student performance standards as fixed, but permitting the amount of time and number of opportunities students have to reach standards to vary.

Student performance standards, according to Spady, might include skills in problem-solving, decision-making, cooperation, respect for others, creativity, adaptability, and self-esteem.

How Can Individual Schools Implement a Restructuring Plan?

School reform must begin at the building level,

Sirotnik argues; teachers, as repositories of first-hand experience, are the primary agents of change. "People who live and work in complex organizations like schools need to be thoroughly involved in their own improvement efforts, assuring significant and enduring organizational change." Schools, he advises, must become centers of critical and self-reflective inquiry into educational processes. They must be seen as "centers of change rather than objects to be changed." Such a shift in mentality, he feels, could heal the split between researchers and practitioners.

Each district will have to assess the trends in its community and establish how best to respond to the concurrent needs of its students. Harvey and Crandall recommend that restructuring attempts first establish a multiconstituent team that participates in the following restructuring stages:

- creating vision
- establishing goals, priorities, and strategies
- determining resources and obstacles
- anticipating policy conflicts and developing agreement procedures
- preparing for and monitoring implementation
- institutionalizing change

The first task in restructuring, according to Cohen, is "to identify key dimensions of the structure of instruction that affect pedagogical practice and student learning." The next step involves a consideration of experience and available research to serve as starting places for structural change. Finally, an understanding of the integration of forces within each school can facilitate change on various levels.

How Can District Officials Participate in the Restructuring Process?

Educators on all levels of the process must become amenable to changes originating at the building level; as Richard M. Bossone and Irwin H. Polishook (1988) advise, "A teacher's capacity and motivation to learn will be shaped by the willingness of the system to change."

Olson (1989) reports, "Increasingly, experts have come to believe that changes within schools cannot be sustained without equally fundamental reforms in district-level management." The most basic change must occur in the roles and relationships existing between educators on all levels. In San Diego Public Schools, for example, central office personnel are seeking a shift in roles—from being controllers, monitors, and protectors of the system toward becoming listeners, assisters, and supporters—from enforcers to enablers. In their new advisory role, they will need to determine and communicate which policy and budget constraints are resistant, and which resilient, to proposed restructuring plans.

District control, Cohen believes, should place emphasis on schools achieving district goals rather than following guidelines. They should create "an orientation toward performance, rather than procedures; in which the district provides the enabling tools and resources to achieve desired ends." Reviewing and approving plans, providing technical assistance and training, garnering local support, and evaluating the restructuring process, he says, will become primary district responsibilities in the restructuring process.

Because of the institutionalization of the school system, Cohen adds, state and federal policymakers must be encouraged to support local experimentation with school structures by reducing regulatory barriers, providing implementation support and technical assistance, linking rewards to performance, and researching and disseminating the results of effective new practices among the schools.

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College of Education, University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403

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